

*This week's blog was the intended talk for this past Wednesday night's hymn festival.

"The Whole Church Sings"

The title of this talk is borrowed from the work of Christian musicologist Robin Leaver. Leaver's book gives an historical overview of congregational singing in Luther's Wittenberg at the time of the Reformation, though the quote is actually Luther's reaction to the singing he heard in Martin Bucer's church in Strasbourg.

I think the title of this book points to the goal of events like tonight's, mainly to encourage committed and robust congregational singing. Leaver's title implies that strong congregational singing is a good thing and evidence of a healthy spiritual vigor within the church. The content of his research in the book affirms this. This then should lead us to ask the question, "Why do we value congregational singing as much as we do? Or, if we are going to poke and prod a little bit, the question to ask might be, "Do we value the practice of congregational singing enough or give it enough of a priority?"

When we commemorate the Reformation, it should not just be about the actual historic event, but it should also serve as a reminder that the church is always to be reforming its worship practices in light of Scriptural principles. There are volumes and volumes of books written on this topic, but this talk needs to be short, so I would like to offer some comments that may offer some food for thought.

In an article entitled "Does It Matter How We Worship God?", Ian Hamilton writes the following:

It would probably surprise many Christians, evangelicals in particular, that for Calvin, and the other magisterial Reformers, the Reformation was first about recovering the true worship of God. Getting worship "right" was for Calvin the first need of Christ's flock. Calvin's ranking worship as first in importance over salvation was due to one very important fact, namely that salvation is a means to an end, with worship being the end itself. We are saved to worship God, now and eternally, with our present public worship being a foretaste of the heavenly worship that awaits us. (From *On Reforming Worship*, ed. David Hall and Jonathan Master)

Every week, as part of our worship service, we affirm that we believe in one holy, *catholic*, and Apostolic church. To be catholic in worship implies continuity. To this point, Robert Scott Clark, Professor of Church History and Historical Theology of Westminster Seminary California writes that "The Reformed church...intentionally harvested the best theology, piety, and practice of the Eastern and Western Church, from the (Apostolic Church) Fathers through the Middle Ages." Terry Johnson writes that "Continuity with the past in doctrine, worship, and ministry has always been a serious concern of Reformed Protestantism."

Continuity in worship suggests that our worship supports a generational continuity—that we worship as our parents did, and as their parents did, while trusting those in authority to

exercise wisdom and right judgment. Such generational continuity in matters of worship serves as a reminder of the covenantal nature of the church. This is why we commit time and resources in training our children here at First Presbyterian Church to read music, and why we continue using an organ and train organ scholars, and why we maintain choirs and instrumental groups of various ages and abilities. It is why we use hymnals still, or at least print music in our bulletins. For centuries, Christian churches have used hymnals and read music, and this was a result of the Reformation. Literacy *included* musical literacy. Luther thought musical education in the church was so important that he believed that men should not be ordained to be preachers without being “well exercised in music.”

It is important that *as* we prioritize a connection to historic worship practices, we also uphold the principle of catholicity, which requires us to absorb what is best from the professing church today. When our family moved to Columbia, it was a great encouragement to discover that Dr. Hughes Oliphant Old was teaching at Erskine seminary, in classrooms just across the street. Holly and I had known Dr. Old and his wife Mary when we and they attended Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. It would be fair to say that Dr. Old was *the* leading authority on the history of Reformed worship and historic preaching. In his succinct but very helpful book entitled *Worship: Reformed according to Scripture*, Dr. Old makes this comment regarding the contemporary worship music movement:

The ministry of praise wells up from the grass roots of Christian faith. It is a folk art that, inspired by the Holy Spirit, comes naturally in its own time. It is the very nature of American Protestantism that the ministry of praise is so central to its worship and flows forth so abundantly and in such rich variety.

In conclusion, how we worship should be an informed balance of the church’s history and a right, biblical catholicity, under the authority of the church. We are not to worship as though we are on an island or function as a type of museum for worship, nor are we to simply follow the trends of worship we see around us. Zwingli forcefully puts it this way: “How dare you introduce innovations to the church simply on your own authority without consulting the Church!”

Whatever the style or mode of music used in worship, it is a help to remember that worship is under an historically informed and biblically mandated authority. Tradition has value when it is anchored in the entirety of church history but can be poisonous when the historical memory of a church is only a generation or two. And while new music and a new style of music can bring a welcome freshness to worship, its characteristic lack of longevity should be acknowledged and therefore sustained by the bedrock of congregational music that has been passed from generation to generation. In approaching music in worship with these things in mind, we hope that it might be said of First Presbyterian Church for many years to come, “the whole congregation sings.”